Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

UNITARIAN BELIEF

VII. WHAT DO UNITARIANS BELIEVE ABOUT HEAVEN AND HELL?

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SERMONS

OF

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What do Unitarians believe about Heaven and Hell?

"Who will render to every man according to his deeds: to them who by patient continuance in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but unto them that are contentious and do not obey the truth; but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; but glory, honor, and peace to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: for there is no respect of persons with God."— ROMANS ii. 6–11.

This is perhaps the best and fullest statement of the law of retribution which we find in the New Testament. It announces the simple fact that good conduct will produce peace and satisfaction, bad conduct misery and discontent. It does not say where this suffering and reward are to take place, whether in this world or the other. It gives no description of an outward hell or heaven, of outward pains or pleasures. The rewards and punishments are in the soul itself, and derived from the sight of truth. All this takes place in the day when God judges the secrets of the soul. Finally, the judgment is impartial on all men alike, Jew and Gentile, Christian and heathen: each is judged according to his works, not according to his belief. Paul adds that the heathen, who never had any revelation through Moses or Christ, have a law written in their hearts, and, when they obey that, are better men than the Jew or Christian who disobeys his more full revelation.

"For not the hearers of a law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when Gentiles which have no law do by nature the things of the law, these having no law are a law unto themselves, in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts." *

This seems plain enough. Two statements it at any rate contains,— first, that every man (Jew, Christian, pagan, or heathen) sees right and wrong, and is to be judged as he does or omits to do what is right, according to the light of his own conscience. Thus every man has his opportunity — or probation, if you please — in this life, and is to be judged by his conduct and character, not by his belief.

And yet this very winter, in this very State, at the end of the nineteenth century, we have had a public discussion going on in one of the most enlightened and free of all Christian denominations, on this question, "How can the heathen be saved without faith in Christ and his atonement?"

To this question three answers are given. What they are may be learned by the discussions reported every week in the *Independent*.

The first answer is that given by the majority of orthodox denominations as represented in their missionary societies. It is that all those heathen who have not heard of Christ are going down into everlasting ruin. Millions every year are falling into an eternal hell because they have not heard of Christ. This doctrine, it is said, is the only one which will induce Christians to send missionaries to the heathen.

The second answer is that of the Progressive School

* See revised version.

represented by Dorner in Germany. They also believe that no one can be saved except by faith in Christ, and that the heathen and many others have no opportunity here to believe in him. Therefore, they believe it possible, perhaps probable, that they will have an opportunity in the other world.

A third class of orthodox believers contend that the heathen have in their conscience what is equivalent to a knowledge of Christ, and that therefore they need no second probation. This view seems both rational and also to accord with the statement of Paul in our text. But, unfortunately, it is often vitiated and nullified by the additional declaration that, as a matter of fact, few, if any, of the heathen ever do accept Christ when offered to them thus, as the law of duty. Consequently, they are still on the way to destruction, and without the hope of the other probation which Dorner suggests. How any one knows that they reject this offer we are not told. I have always supposed that it was the object of the day of judgment to declare this, and that we are not to judge any one before the time.

When we listen to such a discussion as this, I think we can understand why there should exist infidelity, atheism, agnosticism, and extreme radicalism. One extreme produces the other. But let us be thankful if we can avoid both extremes, and believe what is reasonable and just in regard to the dealings of God with his creatures, without renouncing our belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The basis of these orthodox theories is that the soul can only be saved by faith in Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly, the New Testament proclaims the saving power of faith in Jesus. But the faith in Christ there taught is faith

in the infinite fatherly love which Christ revealed; it is faith in divine mercy, in a goodness before unimagined. Christ was a revelation to mankind of an inconceivable love, which filled all hearts with gratitude. They who saw him saw the Father, whom they had never seen before, and whose character was made known by no other lips than his. To say that no man came to the Father but by him was to state a matter of fact; for where in those days was there any voice but his that revealed that fatherhood of God?

But this is all inverted when we are told that the divine, all-loving Father is a being who has made an eternal hell into which he sends those who have never heard that he *is* their Father. If the heathen do not know that God is their Father, *he* knows that he is their Father; and he will be their Father in this world and in all worlds, no matter what our theology may say. God has said, "All souls are mine." Every immortal soul, wherever it may be,— in the outer darkness of the blackest ignorance, in the deepest hell of the foulest sin, in the moral death of the coldest selfishness,— every such soul belongs to God, and whatever belongs to him must sooner or later be brought back to the Father's house.

Faith in Christ is the way of salvation. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." What *is* faith in Christ? Is it a magical charm, a form of words? Is it the assent of the intellect to a proposition? Is it the outward profession of belief in some doctrine about Jesus? Was this what that great and generous soul desired when he said, "Ye believe in God, believe also in me"? On the contrary, he tells us that those who speak against the Son of Man shall be forgiven, provided

they do not deny the divine spirit of truth in their own souls (Luke xii. 10). He declares that it is not those who say to *him*, "Lord! Lord!" who shall enter his kingdom, but those who do the will of his Father (Matt. vii. 21). Has he not himself described to us the principles on which the divine justice will treat the Gentiles, the heathen, the outsiders? He has taught us that, in the great day when all the solemn pretences and empty shows and hollow forms of life are consumed by the light of eternal truth, it will be those who have done good to their fellow-men, who have fed the hungry and clothed the naked, whom he will claim as his own. They did not know that they were doing it for him. Perhaps they had never heard of him. Perhaps they had heard of him only through a dark theology, a persecuting priesthood, an empty ritual. They thought they were infidels. They may, in their ignorance, have denied his gospel, rejected his name. What is that to him? They are in sympathy with his spirit; they have loved his real character; they have followed in his true footstep. And so he says unto them, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

When we think of the day of judgment, we are apt to think of it as a dreadful revelation only, a day merely of wrath and condemnation. We think of it in the spirit of the great mediæval hymn, "Dies iræ, dies illa," as a time when the just are hardly safe, when even the saints tremble, and the only safety from the wrath of God is under the protection of the benign Jesus. But how many blessed discoveries will also be made when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed! How many cruel misunder-

standings will be removed! how many of the long tragedies of life in which good people are mutually estranged by misconception and falsehood will have a joyful ending! Then will pretence and hypocrisy be exposed. Then the paraded virtues and the hollow shows of life will be stripped of their disguise. But also they who in their patient hearts have borne and forborne, and not complained, who have clung to the right amid sharp trial, who have resisted temptation, who have kept their faith in goodness when all around was black, shall have their modest merit understood, and their long fidelity known. How many good actions seen only by God, how many earnest prayers and longings for truth, how many deeds of generous love, of cheerful self-denial, of conscientious devotion unheard of by man, shall be revealed in the light of that divine truth! Then it will be known how much more conscience there has been in the world than we have supposed, what a soul of goodness has existed in things evil, what a longing for right may have remained in the most abandoned hearts. I call the day of judgment, whenever and wherever it comes, a day full of blessing. It is a blessing to those who are self-deceived to be made to see themselves as they really are, a blessing to know the truth even if it condemns us, a blessing to be driven out of our refuges of lies, and so be lifted out of hell into heaven.

In what a crude way have these great doctrines been treated! How have figures of speech, taken from fire and brimstone, from worms and physical pain, been turned into realities! How has the spiritual meaning disappeared, and only material images remained! The very substance and vitality of Christ's teaching has thus dis-

appeared. Talk of naturalism in doctrine! What greater naturalism than to consider heaven and hell places into which the good and the bad are put, the one a kind of palace, the other a sort of prison? Jesus took all outward things in nature as images of spiritual realities and moral laws. His church has often kept the images and omitted the realities. Instead of heaven and hell being seen to be conditions of the soul, they are regarded as localities, outside of us, in some part of the universe. In one will be bars and bolts, chains and torture; in the other, thrones and crowns, feasts and music. And so we miss the great lesson; namely, that all outward suffering is not so bad as sin, that all outward enjoyment is not so blessed as goodness, since goodness brings us near to the love of God, and sin turns us away from him.

This is the belief of Unitarians concerning heaven and hell. This is what was taught by Channing, by Henry Ware, and by others in our communion who have spoken with authority. The only heaven in the universe is goodness, the only hell is sin. Pain and pleasure come from outward circumstances and conditions; but these are temporal, and therefore have an end. They are superficial, they leave no permanent impression on the soul. Eternal life and eternal death are the life and death which come from within, from our spiritual condition and character. The lesson of life is to know how infinitely more important is the state of the soul than anything else. If we come to know this, we have learned that for which life was given us.

Unitarians have always rejected with horror the common doctrine of everlasting punishment and an everlasting hell, as something opposed to reason, justice, and the

teaching of Jesus. No one who believes in the God and Father of Jesus Christ can consistently accept such a doc trine as this. It dethrones God, and makes him divide the sovereignty of the universe with the devil, the devil ruling forever in hell, God forever in heaven. It teaches that the Being who would have all men to be saved, and who wishes only for goodness, maintains an eternal receptacle for everlasting sin. It declares that he who commands us to forgive our enemies seventy times seven is unable to forgive his enemies or to bring them to repentance after they die; that he who is shown to us under the gracious image of the Father of the Prodigal, and who has more joy over one sinner that repents than over ninety-and-nine just persons who need no repentance, will be forever deprived of that joy in the case of all who die impenitent. The physical fact of death places an impassable barrier between the infinite Father and the finite child. The great doctrine of redeeming love is palsied, and we can no more speak of the omnipotence of goodness; for evil is as strong as goodness, falsehood as truth, and the love of Christ is declared unable to conquer sin or fully to redeem the world. Thus in this doctrine of everlasting hell, absurdity is heaped on absurdity, impiety added to impiety. It is no answer to this to say, as is usually said, that, since evil exists here, it may exist hereafter; that, since sin and misery now are not inconsistent with the providence of God, sin and misery hereafter may be not inconsistent with it. This is no answer. The sin and evil we now see are finite, temporal, earthly. What we know of evil, and all that we know, is that it is finite. The difference between finite evil and infinite evil is an infinite difference. Finite evil and suffering may be the

means of such vast good hereafter that it may be looked back on as in itself a blessing. But an evil which lasts through eternity can never be in itself a blessing. The evil of sin may be annihilated by the power of repentance and forgiving love; but an everlasting hell means everlasting sin, which God hates, but is unable to conquer.

No doubt passages may be quoted from the New Testament and from the words of Jesus which seem to teach everlasting punishment. But some of these are mistranslations, some are figures, and all are to be interpreted by the spirit of Christ's teaching. If it could be shown that Jesus really believed in an everlasting hell, and that we must believe in it in order to be Christians, then the question would arise if it were not our duty to reject Christianity rather than dishonor God by such a doctrine. But this necessity is not on us, since the whole spirit of the gospel is the other way. It tells us that the divine love will conquer all evil, and that all enemies will be finally subdued by the truth and goodness of the gospel. Sooner or later, sin shall cease and evil be conquered. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The warnings of Jesus against sin and its consequences are profoundly solemn, for no one ever sees the evil of sin as it is seen by the eye of purity. To him it was the one great misery of the world. Better pluck out your right eye and cut off your right hand than do wrong. There was nothing so terrible to him as the falsehood of the hypocrite, the hardness of heart, the selfishness, the cruelty of the human soul. From this he came to save the world. He came to save his people from sin itself, and only indirectly from its outward consequences.

He came to inspire a faith in the goodness and truth of God, which should lift up men's souls and lead them to aspire to be followers of God as dear children. Wherever he went he diffused this influence, he created this spirit. He sat by the side of the poor Samaritan woman, teaching her the doctrine of true worship. He taught men to forgive their enemies, to do good to those who hated them; and he himself set the example of this forgiving love. To him heaven and hell were here, close by; heaven consisting in a fulness of love, hell in the darkness and woe of a selfish heart.

Unitarians do not deny an outward retribution here and hereafter. They believe that every tree will bear its own fruit; that inward love and truth will produce outward contentment; inward evil will be followed by outward suffering. But they do not think that the punishment of sin comes from the divine anger, but from the divine wisdom and goodness. Outward evil is the solemn sentinel warning us to leave the dangerous path and return to the safe way. Pain and suffering are friendly angels, not angry demons. They come to make us serious and earnest, to rouse the sense of responsibility, to save us from worse evils. We cannot always understand the law by which they arrive, nor always know the meaning of their message. But this hidden meaning we shall one day discover.

The awful shadows which rest on this life, the hells of misery and sin around us here, are warnings that life is very serious, and that we must fight the good fight to the end. They rouse us from our drowsy self-content, and show us the power which rests in every soul to defy outward fate, to battle against circumstances, and to rise to

the highest satisfaction on the ruins of earthly pleasure and temporal peace. Thus the hells no less than the heavens of this world are the servants of God and the helpers of men. They are dark and bright angels of divine mercy, sent to arouse the noblest faculties within us, and to save us from the misery of moral death and emptiness of heart.

In looking back over our lives, we often see that what seemed at the time the worst hours, and the most hopeless in their wretchedness, were in reality the best of all. They developed powers within us which had heretofore slept, developed energies of which we had never dreamed. We seemed to be walking through the valley of the shadow of death, to have descended into the lowest hell of despair; but out of that anguish were born deathless capabilities, and in the midst of those damps of death the day-star of an undying hope arose in our hearts.

There are many hells and heavens in this life, probably there will be many in the other. But we shall not have learned their lesson till we are able to see God and his love in them all, and say, as was said perhaps a thousand years before Christ: "If I ascend into heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there."

Unitarians do not believe that there is anything like wrath in God. Anger is a weakness, anger is suffering. Indignation is necessary to us, to help us to fight against powerful wrong. In order to resist evil, we must be indignant with it. But God needs no such help. It is impossible for the infinite intelligence to be angry with the beings whom he has himself made, and made just as they are. When it is said that "God is angry with the wicked every day," the meaning is that to the wicked

God seems to be angry : they are not at peace with him, and so, by a necessary law, they feel that he must be at war with them. Every one sees God according to his own state of mind. "To the pure thou wilt show thyself pure ; to the merciful man thou wilt show thyself merciful ; and to the wrathful man thou wilt show thyself wrathful." It is the dark penalty of disobedience to separate ourselves from the love of God. This is the hell below all other hells, to lose the sight of the divine love, the sense of the fatherly goodness, the conviction of an ever-present care ; not to see the heavenly smile which shines in the sun, passes by us on the breezes, and comes to bathe us in a sweet content. The penalty of going away from God is that we *are* away from him, and therefore think that he is away from us. As long as we think so we dare not return. Forgiveness of sin by Jesus Christ means that God sends us by his blessed gospel the conviction that he is not and cannot be angry ; that he loves us still ; that he desires that we should repent and return, and so leads us to say, "I will arise, and go to my Father." Forgiveness is a change wrought in us by the love of God ; some influence in our soul, creating faith in the divine mercy. It is not removing the outward consequence of wrong-doing, but the inward consequence, which is separation of heart from God. The man who is forgiven has still to fight his way back to the place he has lost ; but he has in his heart the sense of his Father's love, which gives him the courage to do so.

We must not take the figurative language of the Bible as though it were literal. If we take literally the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it would not only teach the reality of an outward hell and physical torture, but a great

deal more. According to the letter of this story, heaven and hell are not places of reward and punishment; for nothing is said about retribution. Lazarus is not said to be a good man, or Dives to have been a bad man. We infer that he was self-indulgent and without sympathy, but that is only an inference. The reason actually given for their present position is that each needed a change. "Son, thou in thy lifetime hast had thy good things, and Lazarus his evil things: now he is comforted and thou art tormented." Of this statement theology has taken no notice. Moreover, it seems that Dives, in the midst of his suffering, had a throb of disinterested love; for, when he could get no relief himself, he was anxious that Lazarus should be sent to warn his brethren, that they might not come into that place of torment. It is said that misery loves company, but this rich man in his misery preferred to be alone rather than to have others suffer with him. If, then, we are to take these parables literally, we must not only believe in an outward heaven and hell, but also that their purpose is not to reward and punish, but to furnish a variety of experience, and that those in hell may be capable of generous sentiments of disinterested good will.

Another expression of Jesus often quoted in support of the doctrine of everlasting punishment is that in Matthew xxv. 35: "These shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal." For some reason, best known to themselves, King James's translators rendered the same Greek word by "eternal" in the last clause of the verse and by "everlasting" in the first. The revised version renders both "eternal," as is right. The meaning of the two words is very differ-

ent. Everlasting means never-ending time: eternal excludes the idea of time. One refers to duration: the other refers to quality. When we read that eternal life now abides in the soul of the believer, we understand a present quality of life, and not a future continuance of being. The passage before us therefore means, "These shall go into the sufferings of the eternal world, and the righteous into the life of the eternal world."

Every place may be a heaven or a hell according to our state of mind. That is always heaven where we have enough to know, enough to do, and enough to love. Knowledge brings content. We become inwardly peaceful as we see more and more of the infinite order and beauty of the outward universe. Work brings content. Peace of mind is given us by all faithful labor for good ends. Love brings content. To pass out of selfish and narrow ends, out of egotism and vanity, out of pride and self-will, into large and generous sympathy, opens the heart to the divine love. So we may enter heaven while yet in this world, and sit in heavenly places with Christ Jesus.

Let us trust God. Let the sad heart take courage; let the doubting soul look up and receive light. So long as we are in loving communion with the Spirit of Goodness we shall not fear, but know that all things are working together for our good.